

**“Let Us Journey On”**  
**Kelly Roman**  
**Fort Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**June 21, 2015**

**Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32**

<sup>1</sup> O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;  
for his steadfast love endures forever.

<sup>2</sup> Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,  
those he redeemed from trouble

<sup>3</sup> and gathered in from the lands,  
from the east and from the west,  
from the north and from the south.

<sup>23</sup> Some went down to the sea in ships,  
doing business on the mighty waters;

<sup>24</sup> they saw the deeds of the LORD,  
his wondrous works in the deep.

<sup>25</sup> For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,  
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

<sup>26</sup> They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;  
their courage melted away in their calamity;

<sup>27</sup> they reeled and staggered like drunkards,  
and were at their wits' end.

<sup>28</sup> Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he brought them out from their distress;

<sup>29</sup> he made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

<sup>30</sup> Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.

<sup>31</sup> Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,  
for his wonderful works to humankind.

<sup>32</sup> Let them extol him in the congregation of the people,  
and praise him in the assembly of the elders.

Just before today's section of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus has spent the day teaching parables—stories that describe the kingdom of God. He's been teaching a large crowd of people, and the disciples are with him.

### **Mark 4:35-41**

<sup>35</sup> On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." <sup>36</sup> And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. <sup>37</sup> A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. <sup>38</sup> But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" <sup>39</sup> He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. <sup>40</sup> He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" <sup>41</sup> And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

After a full day for Jesus and the disciples, their work is not over. The sun has set, but Jesus has a plan for the nighttime. He says to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side." They're leaving their Jewish environment for the Gentile side of the Sea of Galilee – the non-Jewish side.

Remember that this was a time in history when Jews and Gentiles were not supposed to associate with each other. Jesus has come to break down such barriers.

But the disciples are still learning who Jesus is and what he has come to do. So, questions may swirl in their brains – are we really going across to the other side? What will happen when we get there? How will we be perceived?

They begin their journey, surrounded by other boats. The wind howls, the waves pound the boat, and it fills with water. But Jesus sleeps through all of the sounds and sensations. The disciples fear for their lives, wake Jesus up, and cry, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"

Have you ever asked Jesus a question like this one?

If you have, you're not alone.

Or maybe you spoke to God and prayed, "God, do you care that this is happening to me?"

Or "Where are you, God?"

Or "Can't you do something about this, God?"

"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" I hear the voices of the Christians who gathered for Bible study at Emanuel AME Church on Wednesday night. I imagine their fear as the night became violent. I think of the grief and shock among the survivors, and the despair of so many friends and family members. And we mourn today for our fellow citizens, members of a church in our own state of South Carolina.

MSNBC Reporter Benjy Sarlin posted an image on Twitter of a prayer vigil that took place in Charleston on the evening of the massacre. He quoted one of the prayers, "If we're not safe in the church, God, you tell us where we are safe."<sup>i</sup>

It's a prayer of lament -- a cry for a new world where people don't have to fear for their lives because of their skin color.

I believe that God's heart breaks for our country -- where racial divisions, distrust, and hatred persist and end precious lives.

We know that this is not the first time that a racial attack has taken place inside a church. There have been a number of articles this week revisiting the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham in 1963.

Martin Luther King Jr. preached the eulogy for the black children who were murdered in the church. His sermon included these words: "These children--unoffending, innocent, and beautiful--were the victims of one of the most vicious and tragic crimes ever perpetrated against humanity."

King goes on to preach, “They say to each of us, black and white alike, that we must substitute courage for caution. They say to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream.”<sup>ii</sup>

King understood the American dream as humanity’s God-given right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.<sup>iii</sup>

Over 50 years later, King’s sermon still rings true.

After the disciples cry to Jesus, “Do you not care that we are perishing?” Jesus wakes up and, with the sound of his voice, stops the storm. New Testament scholars note that when you look at the Greek roots of “Peace! Be still!” it’s more like “Shut up! Stop it!”<sup>iv</sup>

Speaking into the silence, Jesus asks, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?”

Hugh Anderson notes, “In stilling the storm, Jesus assumes the authority that in the Old Testament is exercised solely by God.”<sup>v</sup> We heard this description of God’s power in Psalm 107:

<sup>28</sup> Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,  
and he brought them out from their distress;

<sup>29</sup> he made the storm be still,  
and the waves of the sea were hushed.

<sup>30</sup> Then they were glad because they had quiet,  
and he brought them to their desired haven.

So, it’s not surprising that the story ends with the disciples asking, “Who is this?” Jesus’ power makes him very different from the other teachers they have known.

John Arthur Nunes describes the disciples’ response in this poetic way: “Once they saw what only Jesus could do, they feared with a new fear. Not horror, not terror, not trepidation, but an eye-opening awareness of God’s utter awesomeness. God’s miracle-working, storm-calming, fear-dispelling,

peace-telling, humble-walking, terror-routing, hater-outing, mercy-loving, cross-bearing, salvation-securing, Spirit-giving, love-living, sinner-forgiving, saint-motivating for justice-doing, Jesus.”<sup>vi</sup>

This same God cares so deeply for Emanuel AME Church, and you and me, and the whole world. It’s a caring that goes beyond our imagination – a caring that surrounds us even when we might not feel it.

We worship a God who doesn’t just care for the world, but has died on the cross to save the world. We worship a God who is working toward a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more suffering.

Jesus says in the Gospel of John, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” He’s not just talking about life after death. He’s talking about abundant life that begins here on earth. In the words of the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

I recently had the opportunity to accompany a friend who was speaking as an alum of a treatment center for eating disorders and alcohol and drug addiction. The treatment center is based on the 12-step approach, so everyone prayed the serenity prayer together, “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”

I was, like many of you, familiar with this prayer. But this was the first time I prayed it in a group of people. So, I experienced it in a new way. This prayer has strengthened so many individuals and support groups. I also think it’s relevant to churches, towns, cities, and governments as we confront the sin of racial injustice in America.

There are aspects of communal life that we can change with God’s help.

I imagine that there are ideas among us on steps that we can take toward change. I hope you will share those ideas with each other and with our church leadership and your neighbors in the community.

In the meantime, here’s what I’ve been thinking about:

We can seek out opportunities to listen to voices we may not be accustomed to hearing. This morning some of our members are worshiping at Abel Baptist Church. Others of us are attending the 1:00 prayer vigil this afternoon.

Last December, some of our church staff and I attended another vigil at Abel in memory of Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin, and others who had died. This helped us better understand the experiences and prayer concerns of our black neighbors.

By listening to new perspectives, we can learn how to work together to build a more loving, peaceful community.

Deep listening takes hard work. We sometimes hear ideas that challenge what we've previously learned. The day after the massacre at Emanuel AME, Brene Brown wrote this: "Until we find a way to own our collective stories around racism in this country, our history and the stories of pain will own us."

She went on to say, "Our collective stories of race in the US are not easy to own. They are stories of slavery, violence, and systemic dehumanization. We will have to choose courage over comfort. We will have to feel our way through the shame and sorrow. We will have to listen. We will have to challenge our resistance and our defensiveness."<sup>vii</sup>

Bob Pierce, who founded World Vision International and Samaritan's Purse, once said, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." These words can guide us as we listen to the stories of history and present day realities. What do we hear and see that breaks God's heart? And when we feel our own hearts breaking, what will we do next?

When I'm working on a sermon, I almost always have at least one song in my head. This time it's been a gospel song called "The Storm is Passing Over." Some of you may be familiar with it. I first learned it when I sang it in a choir. I didn't know about the song's composer until this past week when I did some research.

The composer's name is Charles Albert Tindley. Although his parents were slaves, he was born free in Maryland, where he was a hired plantation worker. After the Civil War, Tindley went to Philadelphia, where he learned to read English, Greek, and Hebrew. He eventually became the pastor of a United Methodist congregation that still exists today. Tindley was known for his preaching and his work for racial equality.

"The Storm is Passing Over" has taken on new meaning for me since Wednesday night. Here are the lyrics that I've been reflecting on:  
"Have courage my soul, and let us journey on  
Though the night is dark, and I am far from home  
Thanks be to God, the morning light appears"

I think of the courage of the family members of the Emanuel victims, telling Dylann Roof that they forgive him. The families' messages do not deny their pain and loss. In the midst of speaking about their suffering, they show a deep trust in God. They turn Dylann over to God, asking for God's mercy on him.

These family members have discerned that forgiveness is part of their journeying on. What a stunning witness to the grace of God -- the God who carries us through every storm of our lives.

As we acknowledge the racial injustice that took place Wednesday night and throughout our nation's history, what will our journey with God look like?

What voices is God calling us to hear? What will we learn from these voices?

When is God calling us to speak?

How can we work together in our community to help build a more loving, peaceful world?

As the body of Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit, let us journey on.  
Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://twitter.com/BenjySarlin/status/611384851724242944>, June 17, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "Eulogy for the Young Victims of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church Bombing," 1963,  
<http://www.drmartinlutherkingjr.com/birminghamchurchbombingeulogy.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "The American Dream," 1964,  
[http://depts.drew.edu/lib/archives/online\\_exhibits/King/speech/TheAmericanDream.pdf](http://depts.drew.edu/lib/archives/online_exhibits/King/speech/TheAmericanDream.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> I am thankful to fellow Presbyterian pastor Austin Shelley for drawing my attention to this interpretation.

<sup>v</sup> Hugh Anderson, *New Century Bible Commentary: The Gospel of Mark*, 1976.

<sup>vi</sup> John Arthur Nunes, "Peace in Terroristic Times," *Preaching Reflections on the Charleston, SC Shooting*, June 19, 2015, <http://www.odysseynetworks.org/on-scripture-the-bible/preaching-reflections-on-the-charleston-sc-shooting/>

<sup>vii</sup> Brene Brown, "Own Our History. Change the Story," June 18, 2015,  
<http://brenebrown.com/2015/06/18/own-our-history-change-the-story/>